

“The Wailing Walls”

Sunday, September 24, 2006

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2006 by Fountain Street Church

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“The Wailing Walls”

READING — From Genesis, Chapter 21

* * * * *

SERMON

Ramadan and Rosh Hashanah arrive together this year, which happens about once a generation. That it comes at the height of tension between Israel and Palestine, on the heels of the second Lebanese war, in the midst of a fervency of fear about terrorism and fanaticism and religious fundamentalism, is all the more telling. For the problem is not the great gulf between peoples and religions and cultures, but the great intimacy. Far from being too distant, one could say they are too close. And as anyone who works with families knows too well, sometimes conflict becomes part of what holds them together as much as what drives them apart.

There is a house, a place quite old and entangled in the vines of ancient grapes and memories. It sits upon a little rise scarcely larger than the house itself. A deft eye would notice the bricks of various sizes and shapes, the walls sloping and repaired, the doorways and windows bricked up on one side and opened on another. It wears its age clearly. Careful observation would reveal that rooms had been added and subtracted, that it had been home and barn and shop.

It stood in a place that made the road bend awkwardly, holding up traffic, and whenever it rained the gutters would fill and make great muddy puddles that splashed on the travelers. Any decent city planner would say it should go. But it remained, because, to the people of the town, what mattered was who built it - or at least the story of who built it, which was older than anything else in the village.

So the house remained, because it was part of the identity of the town. People came from afar to see the house because they heard of it and the legendary builder from long ago. Some made their living selling trinkets and food and lodging to visitors. Not many towns were as famous as theirs. And all because of the house, and the story of who built the house, and the feud.

The feud has been going on a very long time. It is barely younger than the story of the house and the builder of the house. And because people in the town have lived here for generations, some are descendents of the builder and his two sons who each claimed the house. Over the years the feud has waxed and waned. Sometimes it was as forgotten, like when drought came and everyone left because no one could find water or grow crops. Or when wars came, and armies fought here. At those times and others, the house was empty. And sometimes it stayed that way a long time. When people came back (often the children of those who were there before) they brought their families with them. They saw the old house, but it was so small that no one lived there while there were newer and better houses still available.

Only when all the good houses were gone did someone live there. Sometimes it was a descendent of one son, sometimes it was a descendent of the other, depending on who won which war and who was too poor to build their own house. So most of the time, most of the time, there was not much to the feud. It was an old, decaying house, and the descendents were not much interested in it when there were better houses nearby.

But now and then, when the town was full and both sides of the family needed a house, the feud got serious. You would think, being family, they would work it out. But when a descendent arrived with his family, and found his cousin there already with his family; and the one had no place to return and the other had been there so long; well, that's when the feud heated up.

"I've got no place else to go!" said the arriving cousin. "I've spent my life here," said the other. "My ancestor was the eldest!" said the one. "Mine was the heir," said the other.

Neither would yield to the other. They each determined to claim the house and occupied it as an army would. Each thought constantly of how to best the other. They each strengthened the house on their side, repairing and building.

The town watched anxiously, unsure what to do. The anger was palpable. Nights were often broken with shouts and angry noises. Still, the tourists came, though. Despite tense times the village prospered; and now, with visitors so much a part of the town, they were no longer able to make a living without them. The town depended on the feud. Frightened though it was, and saddened by the misery in the old house, their prosperity was tied to that misery.

Not consciously, but somehow those distantly related to one side began to be championed, one over the other, and vice versa. Each defended the rightness of the one and the wrongness of the other. Now and then they would all decry the violence and proclaim a plan to end it all, but just when it seemed to work, something would ruin it. And each side would resume their hostility and suspicion.

In the house, angry shouts brought wailing and weeping, eerie quiet led to worrisome whispers. From time to time the police would be called. Now and then the fire department came. But that did not end the feud or solve the basic problem. It was a family dispute, after all. Who were they to presume to step in? And yes, the house itself and the area around it was decaying because of the feud, but for the rest of town it was actually a blessing. Why kill the goose, as it were? Sad as it was, painful as it was, shameful as it was, there was no solution. So with shaking heads bespeaking their sorrow and much nodding of understanding, the town did nothing.

Gradually, though, the visitors trickled away. Over the years the appeal of the house and the story and the feud became a painful persistent fact. People now stayed away more than came. Oh, there were always a few visitors and the town always hoped they would come back. But it did not see that the feud was now a plague on the town, not just an affliction in the house. Seeing no future beyond this one, the town became as hopeless as the house. People in town took sides in a new and hostile way.

"You should tell your cousins to give in," said some. "You should take your

cousins in," said others. What was one town was now two, and neither had the strength to repair the roads and clear the garbage and put out the fires. The town began to look like the house. Almost without realizing it, the angry words came from other windows now, and the weeping. The wailing echoed from many walls, not just one.

Sometimes there is no happy ending, nor a moral. I started this tale thinking about a film I want to see, *House*, by Amos Gitai, an Israeli director who chronicled the story of one house over fifty years as it passed between Israeli to Palestinian occupants. The allegory is obvious, as you realized as well. What I have discerned is that the paralysis that afflicts Israel and Palestine is subtly part of the whole village of nations that are involved. The stalemate there, which is so costly to those who live there, is ironically useful to others.

Irshad Manji, critic of her own Muslim faith, sees Palestine as a symbol used by Muslim regimes to focus anger than actually belongs at home. Not that there isn't something horrible in Palestine, but that it is useful to point to when their own people are angry.

Europe, charred by its own complicity in the holocaust and two millennia of anti-Judaism, and thus the reason Israel exists today as a refuge, stands up for Palestinians because it needs a way to deflect its massive shame and guilt.

The United States, deeply drawn to Judaism by its puritan roots, its own symbolic pilgrimage in the wilderness to the holy land – a new Israel, and the conspicuous loyalty of its many accomplished Jewish citizens, identifies with Israel as deeply as Europe resists it. It is virtually guaranteed to be Israel's firmest friend.

We all have a stake in the status quo because our identities are involved. We are fearful of what the future could bring because it would mean losing our identities. And fear resists change, even when the status quo is awful. The only path is one that offers a future in which everyone has a true hope, a real stake. And ironically, the place that begins is not in Jerusalem or Ramallah. It must come from those in town, not the house, who have to sever their stake with the status quo.

From where I sit, the first step is to make other steps possible. Simply speaking, rebuilding Palestine and Jordan and Lebanon and yes, Iraq, are the key. Not politically so much as economically, much as the US rebuilt postwar Europe.

I propose that each year for the next five, 20% of the money spent on the military budget be turned into economic aid. No change in the money, but a change in the use. And, following on Manji's advice, a lot of it channeled toward microloans and investments in business that individuals, especially women, could operate. Bring the region back, as we did Germany sixty years ago. Make it worth living in, and you will then not have everyone trying to live in one house.

In ancient times, some years after Babylon had captured Israel and carried it into captivity, it allowed the Israelites to return. Many did not. A large Jewish community remained there until modern times. It became the center of Judaism after Jerusalem was destroyed. The Talmud was written there.

Give people real choices, and they will make real choices. Right now, there

are no choices. But we can change that. The only question is whether we, who can choose, will.

Ramadan kerim, happy Ramadan. L'shana tovah. To the new year. May it truly be a new year for all.